Written by Steve Ostermann
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Clutch shooting, dogged defense help Grafton girls dodge Bay in mettle-testing regional championship game

Leave it to a senior to pave the way for another long tournament run by the Grafton girls' basketball team.

One year after the Black Hawks rode an upperclassmen-led lineup all the way to their second WIAA Division 2 state title in three seasons, they kept their defense of the 2009 crown alive last Saturday with a clutch effort from another veteran.

Senior forward Ali Lorge went 4-for-4 at the free-throw line in the final 45 seconds to help Grafton outlast Whitefish Bay, 32-25, in a regional championship game at Port Washington High School.

Lorge's sharpshooting helped the Hawks withstand a fourth-quarter rally by Bay, which trailed by 11 points entering the final period before cutting the deficit to 28-25 with 2 minutes left.

"I'm very proud of the way the girls pulled together to win this," said Grafton coach Bob Maronde, whose team scored its fifth straight victory, including a three-game regional streak that propelled it into sectional play this week.

“Bay really came back strong against us, which didn’t surprise me because they always play us tough. We had to dig down to come away with a win.”

Saturday’s win gave Grafton the rubber match after splitting two North Shore Conference games against the Blue Dukes, who edged the Hawks, 48-45, in the last meeting Feb. 12.

The Hawks never trailed after taking an 8-5 lead midway through the first quarter and appeared to be in control when they stretched the margin to 19-7 by halftime. Kim Schacht’s buzzer-beating jumper punctuated the momentum that Grafton carried into the locker room.

Besides balanced offense that included a team-high seven points from Hannah Eichler, the Hawks’ disciplined first-half effort featured stifling defense — so stifling that Bay failed to score in the second quarter.

“I was very pleased with our intensity,” said Maronde, who noted that his team dug down despite a heavy emotional burden. The previous night, Matt Malkowski, a popular Grafton High School senior, was seriously injured in a car accident.

“During our Saturday morning shoot-around, I didn’t know if the girls were going to be able to pull it together,” Maronde said. “It was very difficult, which is why I’m so amazed at how well they played.”

The Hawks’ surge continued in the third quarter, combining steady defense with time-consuming offense.

After two free throws by senior center Myranda Tyler gave Grafton a 25-11 lead with 3:20 left in the period, Bay scored five unanswered points, but Eichler made it 27-16 with a tip-in that dropped through the net at the buzzer.

Unwilling to roll over, the Dukes regrouped for a late charge. Taking advantage of a suddenly tentative Grafton offense, they scored the first nine points of the fourth quarter.

The rally, capped by a layup from Jessica Switzer, pulled Bay within 28-25 with 2:08 left. Thanks to Grafton turnovers, the Dukes had two more possessions to

trim the deficit further, but after Switzer missed the front end of a bonus free-throw chance, the Hawks grabbed the rebound.

Lorge drew a foul and hit the first two of her four key free throws. Two more Bay missed shots led to three more Grafton free throws, including the final two by Lorge.

“I didn’t have any doubt Ali would make them,” Maronde said, noting Lorge is the Hawks’ top free-throw shooter this season with an 89% average.

Lorge also said she was confident at the line, as were her teammates in withstanding Bay’s frantic comeback.

“We knew we had to stay strong and keep moving the ball,” Lorge said. “We had to keep running our offense.”

Maronde said his team, which failed to scored from the field in the final quarter, did a good job of chewing up the clock but should have looked to the basket more often down the stretch.

“We got a little bit too tentative,” he said. “We got a little tight on our shots and were hesitant to take them.”

The win improved the Hawks’ season record to 15-10 and advanced them into a sectional semifinal game against Sheboygan Falls (18-7) at 7 p.m. Thursday in West Bend.

Falls won the Eastern Wisconsin Conference title with a 13-1 record and is coming off a 63-43 win over Kettle Moraine Lutheran last Saturday. The high-scoring Falcons, who average 64 points per game, are led by front-line players Lauren Carmen
(14.6) and Emilie Leffin (11.4).

The winner of Thursday’s game will face the winner of a semifinal between Pewaukee and New Berlin Eisenhower for the sectional title at 1 p.m. Saturday at Waukesha South.

Grafton 50, Brown Deer 39

The Hawks withstood a long-distance barrage by Brown Deer's Mariah Weddle in a regional semifinal win at home March 11.

Weddle scored a game-high 18 points, including five three-point baskets, but it wasn't enough to keep Grafton from steadily pulling away.

The Hawks jumped to an 11-6 lead in the first quarter and never trailed, stretching the advantage to 24-16 by halftime and 34-24 after three periods.

Nine Grafton players scored in the game, led by Tyler with 12 points and Lorge with 10.

Grafton 63, Young Coggs Prep 14

There was no suspense in a regional quarterfinal win by the Hawks, who held a 19-0 lead after one quarter against an overmatched foe.

The margin ballooned to 40-2 by halftime and stood at 54-7 after three periods despite a steady rotation of players that gave Grafton reserves extended court time.

Twelve Hawks scored. Tyler finished with a game-high 13 points, and Eichler added 12.

MEMBERS OF THE Grafton girls' basketball team were all smiles as they celebrated a win over Whitefish Bay that gave them a WIAA Division 2 regional championship last Saturday in Port Washington. Photo by Sam Arendt